PENANGTON'S LOVE AFFAIR

By R. E. YOUNG, AUTHOR OF "SALLY OF MISSOURI"

THE man who rode up to Tandy's saloon, on the corner of Main and Penryn streets, Penangton, Morning County, Missouri, in the early morning of the last Saturday of that September, and drank, standing in his stirrups, was Marly Carewe.

Despite his forty years, Carewe was at this hour a handsome man, with a face as thin and battered as a nicked blade, but aristocratic in its tapering sharpness, its weak refinement suggesting what his forefathers had done for him as evidently as what he had done for himself. His clothes were shabby, but there was a peculiar slinking grace in his way of wearing them. As he raised his eyes from his libation in front of Tandy's, he caught sight of the crowd of farmers moving into Court House square, a block down the street. On some vagabond impulse, more insolent than social, he dismounted where he was, tied his horse at Tandy's rail, and moved over toward the square.

It was a stock-sale day and almost all of the farmers who were hitching in the square had a young horse, or a steer, or a cow tethered to the rear of the great farm wagons. The farmers women were standing up in the wagons, smoothing down their dresses, which had bunched around their waists in awkward looking rolls. The stockmen and farm hands who had come in on horseback were dismounting with a guffawing raillery, through which rang a note of nervous concern lest they show some susceptibility to town sights and sounds. Some wealthy people were climbing down from surreys and rockaways. Now and then a steer bellowed, a cow lowed, a horse shinnied, a child insisted that his shoes pinched.

By the time Marly Carewe had reached the lamp post in front of Sneed's grocery store, the exodus from the square had begun. Marly propped himself against the post and waited. There was a supercilious sneer in his heart, but his lips smiled at the people. And the people, as though they could not help it, at once pressed toward him with outstretched hands and hearty words of welcome.

"Marly?—Ef 'tain't!—Could-a told you any p'lace—Look jest same as when you wuz a boy—Have a chaw?—Mighty glad to see you—Huccome you to come?—Have a chaw?—huccome—when—why—" Through all the comment and question that surged about Carewe ran a current of peculiar uneasiness, but Carewe, borne along on the impulse to be affable for the minute, kept skillfully out of the reach of the undertow, answering ever so pleasantly, his long light eyes shifting evasively, every movement, every inflection disengaging the old, compulsory, Carewe charm of manner. Oh, yes, he had been away nearly half his life—Oh, yes, Penangton was home to him after all; the home place was still down there on the Bluff, his sister was there; naturally, he had come back—oh, yes. He did not use much better language than the unlettered people who cluttered up the sidewalk about him; he was not better than they; in integrity of character he was not nearly their equal; but that manner of his—caressing, cavalier, fascinating—in some sly way made of him a manor lord toying with his yeomen. He grew tired of the people, however, almost immediately. Locking arms with one of the stockmen, he drew off down the street, back toward Tandy's.

Free from the Carewe charm of manner, the farm people, watching Marly, began to talk among one another, haltingly, looking into one another's wide, honest eyes, shaking their heads, as though they felt afraid that they had been duped. They broke up, little by little, into groups, that were at once added to by town people who saw friends and customers in the groups and mingled with them cordially. Just outside Sneed's quite a throng lingered. All the talk, up and down the street, was about Carewe.

"The first thing after he got back," said Sneed, "was to prance in and make us all speak to him, same as he's just done with you fellers—make us speak to him, us men who chased him out of town nineteen years ago! Gosh! He's got them old Carewe ways. Said he'd reformed. Well, then, next thing, Sam Slave came down f'm Kan' City on a temperance campaign this week, and here, last night, Marly marched up and signed the pledge."

"Aw, wall, ef he's signed the pledge—ef he's reformed—" began a teetotaler leacon from Pretty Plain Church, between Penangton and Weaver, but Sneed couldn't let him go on.

"Pledge, your cow's hind foot! It's just his way of wheedling more money out of Miss Kate. Look up yonder at Tandy's! Before this day's done he'll be raisin' the Samuel Hill as bad as ever he did in his life."

Sneed's words forthwith swung his visitors up toward a subject that ripened in Penangton at regular intervals, like nuts. Old total abstinence arguments, pro and con, began to be thrashed out. Farmers and Penangtonians who didn't drink arrayed themselves on one side; those who didn't drink, but occasionally "took" a drink, lined up on the other. Two of the town drunkards lounged by, blinking over the shoulders of the crowd.

"Aw, you-all don't know what you're talkin' about," said Sneed, thrusting his jaw well into the wrangle; "you ain't got the c'rect idea. Major Masterson's the man that's got the c'rect idea. You cayn't fence a man outer temptation in this world. Naw, not if you push him into two feet of space and cage him up with iron bars. Shuckins! the major's right, no two ways about that!"

The bringing in of Major Masterson's name gave an abrupt turn to the thought of the conclave. "Say," said a man from down Weaver way, "say, is it true that Miss Kate Carewe won't marry the major lessen he signs the pledge? Is that true?"

The speaker had not been in the county a great while.

"Oughter be true. Been true nineteen years."

"Well, but lordy! Nineteen years is a long time. Why don't the major sign just to be done with it?"

"Huh! Why don't Miss Kate give in without his signin'? Major Masterson can keep straight without pledges. He has whisky in his house, but you never see him in a saloon. But yet, he won't give in about that pledge signin'. 'Tisn't in the Mastersons to give in."

"And Miss Kate won't give in?"

"No, and Miss Kate won't give in—she's Presbyterian. So she and the major have just gone and gone on."

"Talk about goin' on an' goin' on, the major's been up to see Miss Kate every Saturday evenin' for nineteen years to ask her would she please stop her foolin' about the pledge an' come an' marry him—uh-huh, nineteen. Le' me see, somebody counted up an' it makes pud near ten hundred times the major's been refused."

"Well it beats me the way that affair goes!"

That love affair between Masterson and Carewe was one of the weighty questions of the town's life. Up and down the length of Missouri Penangton was known as much for her love affair as for her academy, her coal mines, her courthouse ring, yet for the town itself the affair remained always a peculiarly impossible thing to get at, a thing up to which you might bustle with views, criticism, advice, but from whose fine reserve you ultimately retired as from a breath of thin air. The men at Sneed's shook their heads impotently another time or two, gave it up, and sauntered about their business.

By mid-afternoon Marly, voice and face flaring and uncontrolled, his slinking grace become tremulous vehemence, his 40 years showing more and more, was going noisily about the streets of Penangton. By late evening the stockmen who had been drinking with him all day began to get afraid of him and to desert him. He went up and down Main street for a turn or two, sulky and silent, and finally took a straight course for his sister's house on the bluff. The farmers who were out in the square making ready to start home, and the town people who were standing in the store doors watching them depart, were manifestly uneasy about Carewe. Up at Toplitz's drug store and at Sneed's grocery there was some talk of sending the sheriff after him, but the sheriff said he had to eat his supper and the idea fell through.

From Main street Carewe turned into the long, one-sided street that skirts the river on top of the bluff. Passing Major Masterson's house on the way, he gripped his riding whip and growled behind his stained teeth. When he reached the Carewe gate he kicked it open and went up the red brick sidewalk, around the house to the rear porch, where his sister, Miss Kate Carewe, was sitting.

"Kate," Marly began at once, his mind so raging with the thoughts that had come into it as he passed Major Masterson's gate that he could hardly hold his words to the line of his purpose. "I want you to give me another thousand dollars and let me cut this place again. It's too full of that jug-hugging, closet-drinking Mesterson—aw, anyway, it's a pig-wallow, this town is—full of that—I got to clear out. The pledge is up with me. You don't intend to turn things over to me anyway—that Masterson's between us. I can see that. You give me the thousand and I'll cut the county again."

The woman in the chair before him clenched her hands in her lap and looked up at him with a shiver of repulsion. She was a magnificent woman; face to face, the two upheld, unwittingly, a great scroll of family history—the man, dissolute, decadent, realizing an ugly heredity to its deplorable finish; the woman, fine, fragrant, in full flower with hereditary virtues and beauty. "Marly," she made answer at last, "I've been waiting for you all day. Waiting to tell you that I am through with you now. You've finished your work with your farce of signing the pledge last night and breaking it this morning: I'm through with you." She was harsh, but the day had been crucial with her. "I don't expect you ever to get it into your head what it can stand you no longer."

"costs decent people to be kind to people like you," she went on before he could interrupt, speaking slowly and coldly; "but, though it has cost entirely too much, you can't say but that I've stood by you up to now—stood by you until I

It was as though her very flesh shrank away from him, but she had so spoiled him for years that he still relied upon the thought that he must remain a Carewe to her, and pushed his case with angry audacity as soon as she stopped speaking. "Aw, ain't I still your own brother, Kate Carewe? Who else has got any claim?—bah! it's that Masterson. Can't I see? But I've got to have that money, I tell you." He bent above her, a rude hand on her shoulder, snarling and vehement. "Give me that thousand then, and take your sideboard-swill of a Masterson."

The sound of footsteps on the gravel of the grape arbor that stretched all the way from the Carewe grounds to the Masterson grounds became distinctly audible, and, turning angrily to look in that direction, Marly saw Major Masterson approaching. The sight made him crazy all in a minute. "Won't the Saturday never come when that swill won't come poking up here? You listen to him, that's the trouble; you listen to his lies about me! I go to a saloon like a man, and you can't stand me, but our major—bah, our jug-hugger"—his vituperations could not be checked even after the major reached the veranda.

As Major Masterson, a strong man, whose shoulders had the settled firmness of maturity without any of the droop of age, came up the steps, Miss Kate rose to meet him, and both stood for a moment silent under the lash of Marly's insane talk. When the major spoke finally he was on fire from his head to his heels.

"If you dare," said the major; "if you dare open your mouth to your sister again before you are in fit condition to speak to her, egad, sir, I'll pull your tongue out by the roots, sir." Speaker, the one negro servant down at the Masterson house, always looked sharp when the major said "egad," but Marly Carewe was wild with whisky and reckless with rage.

"Bah, you!" Marly sneered; "you sit by a whisky jug all day. Who are you, to criticise my condition or what I say to my sister? I'll say what I d——"

"No, you'll not!" thundered the major. He stepped directly in front of Marly, who, despite some advantage in years, wavered, reddened, fell back on his cavalier qualities, and muttered:

"By Gad, if I didn't think of your gray hairs——"

"Think every hair as black as your own heart, sir, and come on!" roared the major in a voice that had a sort of detonation in it, all the more cyclonic because he didn't particularly care to be told that his hair was gray; and in the storm that broke at once there was a violent rocking back and forth of two figures, a thrashing and pushing down the red brick sidewalk, a shuffling and choking, a banging and scraping, and at the finish of it all Marly Carewe found himself outside his sister's gate.

"'Think Every Hair as Black as Your Own Heart, Sir, and Come on!'"

"All right!" he howled back impotently from that coign of disadvantage; "all right; maybe we're quits—but wait—I'll fix you yet—fix—you—yet——"

His rage broke more and more weakly about the veranda as he shuffled down the street, and Miss Kate and the major sat down in their accustomed places to watch the afterglow on the river. It was Indian summer out beyond them. All that wild quiver of beauty at its topmost, all that passion of color and light and sound that had made June riotous had quieted little by little, through the white heat stretches of July and August, until, on this September evening, Penangton, river and hills, quiver and passion, lay in a delicate drowse of reflected color, light and sound; palpitant blue and shadowy gold on the hills; long gleams on the water; far-away bird calls from the willows in Sweet Corn Bottom. Though a leaf idled down sometimes, the summer was not gone. Nothing seemed sere or deadened yet; you got no feeling of something gone. Indeed, that veil that was on the land, that wonderful, remote, alluring blue, with its fringe of shadowy gold, trailed straight back into June, so that, instead of any sense of lost summer, you had your June, flawlessly beautiful in memory, rose-tangled, and your September, too.

"Kate," said the major, his voice, despite the long wait, low and shaky, like a young man's when he is unbearably in love; "Kate, I don't blame you for hating the effects of whisky, you know"—he said this with a peculiar routinism in his choice of words which a terrible exasperation, "a Presbyterian conscience is nothing but a jingling harness on love with you. Why don't you love me fully and completely, as I love you? If you did, if you did love me as I love you, you couldn't be obstinate, nothing would count against the love—not principle, not all of Calvinism!"

"I must do what I think is right," insisted Miss Kate, little hair-lines reining up her eyes and lips, and puckering them fast at the outer corners, "—but oh, Clay, I'm tired to-night; besides, we've said everything long ago. If I should marry you without the pledge, I should feel that I had helped to make a drunkard out of you."

She made a fine picture sitting there by the major, her face showing the burning zeal with which she regarded the striving of her own soul. The folds of her gown fell in a beautiful amplitude, the rare movements of her shapely hands and arms showed an almost girlish litheness. Her extreme advantages of face were especially manifest in her fresh skin, her long affectionate eyes, with their carefully held corners, and her full lips with the little hair-lines reining them into a whimsical life-time contradiction. There was no gainsaying the fact that Kate Carewe still had the beauty that had made her girlhood famous through all Missouri. At 38 she made you think of a Greek goddess who had, through some inadvertency, turned a Presbyterian.

"Kate Carewe," said the major, after he had looked at her for a while in meditative silence, "I'm going to pick you up some day and carry you off by force."

"Stop, Clay, please; please stop."

"No, I sha'n't stop—something's got to be done, Kate—we've become monomaniacs after all these years—something's got to be done—I'm going to——"

"Come inside, Clay; it's growing dusky; come inside to the light."

The major blundered again, allowed himself to be deflected, and they went inside and played eleven games of checkers, while his vehemence subsided. Then they read some little passages from Bailey's "Festus," and then he started home through the grape arbor.

There were four breaks in the grape arbor between the Carewe house and the Masterson house, both fine old houses of antebellum make, standing, deep-porched and massive, above the river on the Bluff. Miss Kate, at an upper window, watched the major's tall form as he plunged into the leafy blackness of the arbor nearest her house. She dropped on the floor at the window, her fine, active figure relaxing with the abandon of a young girl's. The night beyond the window was glorious. A few night sounds cut across the still air. Ribbon, the saddle mare in the Masterson stable, was nervous, and whinnied a plaintive question from her stall now and again. The crackle of the gravel under Major Masterson's feet was noticeable. He stepped out into the first break and turned to look toward Miss Kate's window, raised humanly at his horse, she ran quickly down the stairs of her house, across her yard into the grape arbor. She had expected to find the major at the foot of the arbor, where he had been shot down with his face turned toward her. He was not there, but there was a trail, warm and wet, straight across the grass. She followed it to the Masterson steps, up the steps to the front door, where she lunged into Speaker, who was rushing out, wringing his hands, and sobbing:

"Goddermercyme! Miss Kate, some'n up an' shooten Marse Clay an' me I d'n know——"

"Henderson, Speaker—up Main street for Dr. Henderson—and nobody else—tell nobody else." The darky, catching at the instructions like a sinking man who sees a rope, bounded down the steps and ran off up the street. Left alone, Miss Kate pushed inside to the sitting room," and found the major stretched out weakly on the couch where Speaker had placed him. His face was as gray as his thick mop of hair and his eyes were closed. On the linen that showed within his vest a red streak was widening. When Miss Kate tried to slip the coat from his shoulders the streak became a broad band, and the major's lips shook. He had already lost a great quantity of blood. She could feel the damp warmth of it down his side, on the sofa, up in the pillow uder his hair; there was a pool of it on the floor where she knelt She called to him, pressed his hands, and kissed him before she fully realized that something else was urgently necessary. Then, all she could think of was whisky. In the few emergencies of accident and illness in her life she had had always to fight a tendency to think of whisky. She came of people who had resorted to whisky in emergencies. If anything happened to a Carewe, he took a drink of whisky; she had been brought up into a reliance upon it, and Marly's crying example, her nineteen years of hostility to it, nothing had quite got her out of that reliance. She stooped and lifted the major to what she thought might be a more comfortable posture, and the red band spread entirely over her shirt; after looking at it for another irresolute second, she rolled up her sleeves and stepped into the dining room.

"The first thing is to cut that coat away," she was saying as she went back to the major. She passed the old-fashioned mahogany sideboard going and coming, and going and coming she saw the big whisky decanter, full to the brim. Back at the major's side, she took the knife that she had brought from the dining room, and, not unskillfully, cut away the coat, linen, and underwear, when she found two holes in the major's arm, one high up, underneath, where the bullet had entered, the other around in front, above his elbow, and belching rhythmically—tsst—tsst—tsst! Tourniquets coming into her mind promptly, she ran back to the dining room and secured a napkin from the table and a bowl from the sideboard. It was a punch-bowl—she noticed that—and again she saw the big whisky decanter twice. She filled the bowl with water, and came on back to the major, folded the napkin into a strip, and tied it tightly around his arm above the belching hole. That quickly got the best of the rhythmic tsst, tsst, and she worked on with great relief for a few busy seconds—bathing his face and shoulder, tidying up the sofa, rubbing his cold hands, calling to him; but she could not make him answer, and she could get no color into his lifeless lips. With her head pressed at last despairingly to his side, she could just hear his heart, faint, laborious, protesting. On its burdened beat there came to her a sharp, strong realization of how precious the major's life was to her, how infinitely more precious than anything else in the world. A little tortured cry escaped her.

"Oh! Oh!" she said, "what am I to do—what am I——" It was a terrible moment; the crisis in her conscience was so tense that it sickened her physically. "If only Dr. Henderson would come on!" She looked at the major again, then through the dining room door at the whisky decanter, wrung her hands with another little hurt cry, and looked back at the major. He was ashen by now, and for the life of her she could not distinguish the flutter of his heart, even with her head pressed close, close to him. "Oh, if I do make a drunkard out of you; if I do!" she moaned. Then she got up guiltily and went into the dining room for the whisky decanter. Her degradation seemed to her awful in its completeness; she was walking across nineteen years of principle, godliness, the hope of heaven, the immortal strivings of her own soul, but she no longer hesitated. Pouring some of the whisky into a glass, she snatched a teaspoon from the table and ran back to the major. Teaspoonful after teaspoonful of the golden, aromatic liquid she forced through his clenched teeth, scorching tears of self-castigation running down her cheeks, and great sobs half strangling her.

Presently the major's eyelids jerked, his lips twitched, the flutter came back on his left side, and a long breath shook through his teeth. "Kate!" he called, as though he were pulling himself in from some far place. "Kate!"

"I'm here, Clay, don't talk. Drink this for me."

Obediently the major opened his mouth and swallowed, lay quiet a moment, and then cried out softly in that far away voice: "For you! Why, Kate? Why, Katherine Carewe?"

"Don't talk," said Miss Kate. "Here, drink this for me."

"Oh, Kate, those nineteen terrible, foolish years——"

"Don't talk," sobbed Miss Kate. "Drink this for me." And when Henderson, the surgeon, with Speaker at his heels, came hurriedly into the room just at that moment, the major, smiling in a queer, deprecatory way, was obeying Miss Kate like a lamb.

"Whew!" sniffed Henderson, that sensitive, trained nose of his in the air, "Whew'ee!"

"Oh, it's the whisky," said Miss Kate, an awful self-accusation shaking in her voice. "It's the whisky. I must have given him a pint."

"You?—Whisky?—Oh, good! That is good!" cried Henderson earnestly, though he did not believe in whisky. He set his instrument case down and took out lint and probe. 'How you for Major?" he asked, as he got at the major's arm with his skilled fingers.

"Why, I feel—feel boosted, Henderson." The major caught his lower lip between his teeth, as though he had to restrain a boyish impulse to be gay, despite his feeble plight.

"Came in from the back, didn't it, that bullet?" Henderson was palpating along the major's arm and frowning a little. "Came in here, nipped the bone and tore through the brachial, and out here—bump! you must have lost some blood before you got this string around your arm. You tie it, Miss Kate? Did you, really? Take hold now, will you? and I'll give you another lesson in surgery. We'll have to do a little ligating and splinting here." Henderson, a sympathetic man, was giving Miss Kate time to get up out of that slough of self-condemnation where she seemed to have mired, voiceless and abandoned. "Now, you, Speaker," continued Henderson, turning to the darky, "I want some water. Why, what's the matter with you, nigger?"

Speaker's first terror had given place to some other equally upsetting emotion. He was staring at the major stupidly, wide-eyed, and he turned slowly and stupidly at Henderson's command. "Well, beto' Gawd!" he muttered as he passed the major on his way to the dining room. "You!" The glance that he gave Masterson was withering."

"Egad, Speaker!" shouted the major, and the darky fell silent again and went on out.

"Who did it?" asked Henderson next. He and Miss Kate were busy over the major's arm and their task required such nice attention that Henderson did not notice for some time that the major made no reply to his question. "Who put that bullet through you, Major, repeated Henderson, when the worst of the trouble with the artery and the splintered bone was over.

"I don't know, do you?" answered the major, quite faintly. He was an unusually strong man, but his nerves had been racked by Henderson's gouging and adjusting. "I don't know who did it. My back was turned. Nobody knows who did it. Whoever it was has got far enough away, and will have sense enough to stay away." The major pressed his face to one of Miss Kate's hands where it lay close beside him on the sofa pillow. Miss Kate dropped the bandage she was holding with her other hand and her head went down beside the major's; Henderson caught up the dropped end of the bandage ever so deftly, twirled it into place, and gave the major's arm a final pat. When Miss Kate raised her head presently a strange thing had happened: the corners of her eyes drooped instead of puckering up tightly, and her lips were no longer reined in with those fine hair-lines. Henderson smiled like a well-pleased artist as he went off to the diningroom. "Always did like those Homeric women!" he said to himself.

In the diningroom Speaker was sulking in the corner to which he had retired after executing Henderson's last command, and glaring now and then at the whisky decanter on the sideboard. Henderson poured some more of the whisky into a glass and brought it back and handed it to Miss Kate.

"Dr. Henderson," her full lips trembled a little, "how much whisky may start a man——"

"It would take a barrel to start that man, Miss Kate," interrupted Henderson. "Here, Clay, drink this."

The major, sipping smilingly, raised his eyes and saw Speaker, black, like a thundercloud, in the diningroom door.

"Oh, see here, nigger," drawled Masterson in that weak voice of his which rocked with humor as well as with weakness, "what you mad about?"

"Yeh spile yeh res'd, thass whut about," growled the negro, availing himself of the privilege accorded to old servants in Missouri. "Yeh broke oveh, thass whut yeh done; a Masterson broke oveh! Yeh broke yeh say-so."

"What does he mean, Major," asked Henderson, the puzzle on his face reflected on Miss Kate's.

"He thinks I ought to have kept my word," drawled Masterson again. "He thinks I haven't shown myself to be a very strong man. Say, nigger, how long since I took a drink—before this—to your certain knowledge?"

"Nineteen years, thass how long. I fill them whisky bottle nineteen years ago an' ain't nary drap leffen it fuh yo' lips f'm that day to this. Thass fuh sure. Yeh low y'aint gwine tech it twel yeh ma'y Miss Kate. Nineteen years, thass how long."

The major lifted his well arm to Miss Kate's shoulder. "True thing, Kate. Haven't touched it since the trouble about it. 'Twould have choked me. But I couldn't tell you, could I? A man can't encourage a woman's obstinacy when he wan's to marry her, can he? Besides, with me it was principle with you it was—ohhh-ooooh, Kate what an idiot I've been! But don't you say it; better let me say it."

"I couldn't say it, Clay, I'm so busy knowing what an idiot I've been," she whispered back and the moment he caught the whisper the major turned to Henderson authoritatively:

"Why, Henderson, I want you to send that nigger over to the Presbyterian parsonage, will you?—and here, wait a minute, have him get Mr. Shanklin up to make out the license—and here, wait a minute, he'd better go by Miss Carewe's house and have Sooky bring some of Miss Carewe's things down here—Can't stand the excitement? Me? I'm not excited. I'm drunk, for the first time in nineteen years, Henderson—ah Kate Carewe, you darling—how you've made me wait!—woman's obstinacy, understand Henderson—and, here, you're to stay to our wedding; understand, Henderson?"

Swept on by the major's insistence, Henderson wheeled in helpless obedience to dispatch Speaker on his several errands, and Miss Kate knelt down and put both arms about the major's neck. Her sleeves were still rolled high, her arms were long, satiny and rounded, and she looked Greek as she bent above him while they waited for the Presbyterian parson.